"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin

Published by The Christian Rural Fellowship, Room 1201, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y.

Number 9 February 1936

HOLBROOK LIBRARY PACIFIC SCHOOL OF RELIGION

Farm Tenancy and the Christian Conscience*

By Brooks Hays

I am not going to talk to you today as an expert because I am not an expert, but I do want to talk to you out of my own experiences about a problem that the nation is becoming very much interested in, that is, the problem of farm tenancy: "What shall we do about tenancy?" No one has a short answer for that question but there are certain considerations to be kept clearly in mind as we search for the solution. We have first of all to think about the physical values that are involved. It is estimated that between thirty-five and fifty million acres of once productive land have been destroyed by water and dust erosion, and that these acres will probably never be useful again, at least not in our generation. In addition to this, there is an impairment of one hundred and twenty-five million acres that a few years ago were not affected by erosion.

Consciousness of this severe loss is coming at a time when we are awakening to another important fact, namely, that the frontier is gone. It was the existence of the frontier with its marvelous opportunities that enabled preceding generations to escape economic oppression, and this meant postponement of the correction of maladjustments associated with the domination of millions of farm and city workers by small financial and industrial groups.

In the complexities of the modern scene we assert the need of an ethical basis for a new land policy. We believe there is a definite spiritual aspect to the farm problem and we agree with the proposition in Henry Wallace's speech before the land grant college presidents a month or two ago that at the end of all these efforts in the economic and political realm is a great abstraction. It is not necessary for me to put it in words--in fact Henry Wallace found it very difficult to do that--but it seems to me that this is a good starting point when we are talking about farmers and their troubles, particularly about the tenant farmers.

We who are engaged in this work try not to be emotional about it and yet I want you to know that I am very grateful for this audience and the interest that the churches are taking in the tenants' plight. It is not an easy matter to get a hearing and when we find groups who listen sympathetically to the story it thrills us to tell it. I think I can use the time most profitably by talking to you about some of the individuals and some of the groups I am personally acquainted with down in my own State of Arkansas. We have a rather typical situation in that state. We have the mountains in the

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*This paper is the substance of an address made by Mr. Brooks Hays at the Annual Dinner of the Christian Rural Fellowship, December 5, 1935, at the Parkside Hotel, New York, New York. Mr. Hays is special assistant to the Administrator of the Resettlement Administration, Washington, D.C.

west and north and we have the rich delta in the east and south, with the level cotton fields and the accentuated tenant condition which goes along with cotton production. The statistical tables of the studies in population trends simply do not reflect the drama that one may find in the Ozark Mountains, in the piney woods that cover the foot hills, and the fertile cotton fields that stretch out to the banks of the Mississippi River.

A few weeks ago my father and I took a trip into the hill country. He is very familiar with that section and told me something about the conditions under which the people once lived. In the few townships just north of my home town a few years ago there were 3,000 people fairly prosperous and reasonably secure. Now there are probably less than 1,000 and these are in serious difficulties. Some of them are among the 300,000 families who went on relief during the depression and were classified as rural relief families. I realized when we went over that territory just what the absence of the frontier meant, for I can recall individual families who moved out of those hills a few years ago, most of them going to Oklahoma to get better land, and with it better opportunities. In the country which I am describing now there are a lot of tenant farmers who once owned the land they till. Many of the aspects of stable rural life are disappearing, for the tenancy system can not retain them. People who live in the towns see this, although many have little understanding of the economic forces which have brought the condition about and perhaps are not as sympathetic because of that lack of understanding. The tenant's town neighbor consequently often shares in the superficial judgment imposed upon the tenant class generally. He thinks of the tenant as shiftless and irresponsible and he has a sense of futility, saying, "You can't do anything about it."

In recent months I have covered quite a bit of the Ozark country and I tell you today that the people of those mountains are not the happy and carefree folk that are often pictured to you. There are certain compensations, of course, for their lack of a cash income, but they are really in trouble. Their fields have eroded, the soil's fertility is vanishing, their markets have all but disappeared, and the institutions which they once enjoyed, their schools and churches, have suffered terrifically. It is a very sensible thing which the Resettlement Administration undertakes when it seeks to relocate some of these families on land which will produce a fair living in communities where schools and churches may be provided, the children reared under normal conditions.

Let's look at the problem in relation to social trends generally. The day I was in the mountains we visited a country school, poorly housed and poorly equipped. Near this region is a national forest which produced and sold $150,000 worth of timber last year. The day before we were there five residents of the county had been arraigned upon a charge of stealing timber from the Government. The forester spoke of one of these men who had a few years before been a leader in the community and a law-abiding citizen. The forester was very tolerant and said, "I can't blame him very much. He fought the depression pretty hard, his own timber was gone and his family was in desperate need of the money that this timber brought." I learned that the court house a few miles away is full at every term of defendants and witnesses from this community which a few years ago had a good record for law observance. It brings to mind the statement of Justin Miller, Assistant Attorney General, who insists that the crime problem will not be solved without the help of those who seek the adjustment of the economic evils with which we are coming to grips.

That the rural slums extend into sections that never knew their blight until a few years ago can hardly be questioned now. The other day I came across some figures on family income for a group to be serviced by the Resettlement Administration. We found scores of families who had had cash incomes of less than $75 last year. The wisdom of making a change must be apparent. Society has paid a big relief bill because we wanted no one to starve, and as I have pointed out, the crime bill which the local communities must bear is certainly an inflated one. Moreover, the lands from which they have sought to make a living can more profitably be devoted to forestry, grazing and recreation. It seems to make a clear case for resettlement. This obviously does not mean wholesale evacuation. There are splendid little valleys to be utilized. There is potential employment in the sound forestry program that is now being worked out.

The hill country type of economic problem is not confined to the Ozarks. The Appalachians present much the same picture and deserve the same consideration. Further, one can not intelligently approach the problem of the cotton lowlands without considering the relationship of the upland situation. When the West ceased to offer allurement, the people who sought new homes went into the bottoms. They crowded into the cotton country, giving negro labor new competition. Then the depression came. Twenty-five thousand people had been leaving my state every year before that, going north "to the factories," but that exodus ceased. It was the normal surplus labor export and its loss means more labor troubles. With both white and negro labor congregating where land is best, is it any wonder that we have such a serious unemployment problem? Well, I heard one middle-aged farmer say, "I helped clear up most of this rich land and now I can't get a foot of it." That task of finding good land is a very real one for thousands of families.

Strangely enough, many farms are held by corporations and some of that land could be purchased for individual families if the credit facilities were available. The pending Bankhead-Jones Farm Homes Bill would establish such facilities by providing for Government loans upon very liberal repayment terms. Thus the method by which Denmark and Ireland reduced farm tenancy might be adopted in America. The bill has passed the Senate and has strong support in the House of Representatives. Favorable action by the House is hoped for at this session. A land ownership program such as contemplated by this measure is an extension (but a necessary extension) of the Resettlement idea. The bill should receive strong support from every section of the country. The farm tenancy evil extends to every state in the Union and even in New England there was a pronounced increase in tenancy between 1930 and 1935. For the United States as a whole it may be said that about fifty out of every hundred farmers are tilling rented land. While the condition is most acute in the cotton country, the wheat and corn belts are experiencing a rapid increase in farm tenancy. Iowa has a greater degree of tenancy than Tennessee. Indiana has passed Florida, and Minnesota's tenancy ratio exceeds Virginia's. The excess is slight in each case, but it demonstrates that this is not any longer a sectional problem. The race aspect is still important but the white race is now more vitally affected than the negro. While the number of negro tenants did not increase between 1920 and 1930, there was a 60 per cent increase in the number of white tenants. Still there are 700,000 negro tenants in the United States and we have a problem here to engage the best effort of our leadership, both white and colored.

Surely there can be no question about the wisdom of changing from the absentee ownership type of farm operation to the resident type. Absentee ownership means the continuation of poverty. It is the curse of southern agriculture.

The Christian conscience is needed in this task of getting the right viewpoint about land tenure. Man's relationship to the soil is still a challenging problem. Lives have been worn out in the effort to secure "title" and often after a bitter struggle it proved to be valueless. Title sometimes becomes an abstract thing. We know that value of ownership depends upon many factors in addition to the quality of soil.

The idea of unity and the idea of cooperation in a society which seeks justice--these are essentially religious concepts. Religion is needed in the delicate task of bending the rigid rules of law pertaining to land, making the rules responsible to human needs. Modifications have been made in the past, sometimes slowly, sometimes rapidly. For example, we once conceived of ownership extending to the "center of the earth and to the top of the sky." Just a few years ago we held the aviator a trespasser upon the land which he flew over. We don't do that any more, and by approval of severance taxes and in other ways we have tolerated the idea that some of the wealth which lies below the top soil belongs to society as a whole and not to the man who happens to have title to the shallow stratum of soil out of which he produces his crops. The once impregnable right to grow whatever one wants to grow on the land is not inviolate, for the effect of one's planting upon the income and well-being of his neighbors is something which society has a right to be concerned with. The restraints which society may throw around the use of land may all be imposed without threatening the most important thing, which is the right of the individual to have a tract of land which he may call his own, upon which he can bring forth food for his family, products which may be exchanged in the market for those things which his family needs.

The Christian mind rebels against absentee ownership. The Christian mind rebels against the widespread corporate ownership of land when operated solely for profit. The Christian mind rebels against the holding of land by wealthy men for recreation purposes if it be land that is adaptable to family-sized farm operation and needed for that purpose. We are going to talk about these practices until they are outlawed.

Along with the destruction of false ideas about land and its control, there should be confidence in the possibilities of cooperative effort making available credit at a reasonable rate of interest, and providing commissary and other services at fair prices. The establishment of adequate church and school facilities will continue to engage Christian thought. All these are component parts of a rounded out rural program.

The land question is fundamental and sound ideas about it must first be accepted. It is the one thing that is limited. We haven't found yet how to make more of it. We have learned all about reclamation except how to do it cheaply, and we may find how to push back the ocean some day so we can have untouched lands for the plow. When that happens, our ideas about ownership and the implications of title will again be changed.

I insist that whenever changes are made they should be made with a sense of the ethical considerations that are involved in this troublesome question. Man is the center of our interest. His welfare is above everything else. It is with that idea that the demand comes for a new land policy that will be based upon the desire to secure the most efficient cultivation of all available acres for the good of those who have a claim to participation in the land's benefits with a sense of obligation to those who are not directly related to the soil.